

## A garden gone by

### ***A \$2.5 million garden project at the city's oldest home prepares to open to the public***

By Harriet Howard Heithaus  
Saturday, March 31, 2007

Two women, like kids conspiring at a candy store window, are peering over a fence at the fresh landscaping beside Naples' venerable Palm Cottage. Another passer-by stops to admire a carambola tree heavy with copper fruit, and they pounce, peppering her with questions.

"What is this plant? Is this the way to get in? Can you give us a tour?"

"Every morning I walk around the grounds and have to answer questions. There's always someone there who wants to know when it's going to open and what certain trees are," said Naples Historical Society Executive Director Elaine Reed. Even while she gave a private tour last month, several interlopers found their way into the not-quite-complete Norris Gardens. People are obviously anxious to savor firsthand the new quadrangle of botanical history flanking the cottage. It's been on the drawing board for four years. The historical society is still trying to pay for the \$2.5 million project, of which \$1.25 million was for the 120-by 200-square-foot piece of property, prime real estate in the heart of Old Naples, one block from the beach.

"We learned about four years ago that a gentleman had bought the corner property beside Palm Cottage. His intention was to build a large modern house on that land. We didn't want to see a large house going up there with Palm Cottage in its shadow," said Donald Wingard, Naples Historical Society president. Palm Cottage is the city's oldest house, a restored example of historic "tabby" mortar construction that is home to the historical society and is open for tours of its memorabilia and furnishings. It occupies the adjacent lot, flanked on the other side by its shade garden, another part of the renovation, and a private residence.

"The land wasn't for sale," continued Wingard. "But we worked with the owner for a year and he finally agreed to sell it to us." That wasn't at a philanthropic rate, he added; the society had to pay market price: "But it's like anyone buying a house here — if you wait till you have the money, you'll never be able to do it. It was important to us not to have that historic place become hidden. It was only after we obtained the land that we asked ourselves what the best historic use for this property should be," he recalled.

The gardens' name came from a major gift from the Norris Foundation. But the society is still paying for the rest of the project with fund-raisers and naming opportunities for everything from bricks to benches to pickets on the new fencing around the garden. It staged a \$200-per-ticket first-view benefit March 24, with history-minded fun: lawn costumes from a lemonade-on-the-veranda era and the screening of a homemade

murder-mystery spoof filmed here in the 1930s, "Naples on the Gulp — Life, Love and Liquor."

The gardens open for regular tours Tuesday. As of last week, there were still plant identification signs and patronage plaques to install, docents to train and a policy on usage to be hammered out. In a county notorious for finding cash value in its environment, the Naples Historical Society has the distinction of worrying the new space will become crowded with functions that limit access. "We're still figuring out how to use the property, but the purpose is primarily the community's enjoyment," Wingard said. "We don't want to schedule in so many events that there's wear and tear on the gardens. And we want to be good neighbors to the people who live here now." That means the society isn't currently taking reservations, beyond what was scheduled before the installation, for receptions or meetings in the gardens. It has an oval lawn and an expansive chickee that could serve both.

However, Ellin Goetz, of [Goetz & Stropes Landscape Architects](#), calls them historical as much as pragmatic. Her company handled the landscaping, and Goetz says her first job was researching horticulture of the Palm Cottage period, around 1895. "We knew because of the time period that classical gardens were popular, so the oval, which is a very classical shape, came to mind," she explained. That configuration also allowed her to extend tendrils of botanical history into its corners. Most of its five small gardens suggest earlier life in Naples and the world:

The Pioneer Garden, on the northeast corner, features plants that would thrive here in the early 20th century, before irrigation systems and Miracle-Gro. With blooming birds of paradise, aromatic wax myrtle and ever-blooming beach dune sunflower, its effect may surprise devotees of imported landscaping. (For a listing by botanical name of the plants in this story, see "Learning Latin," accompanying this story.)

The Edible Garden, which, within a year, has already given the Palm Cottage staff more star fruit than it can eat. The dwarf papaya tree, with leaves the size of manhole covers and flashy purple stems, threatened to bend under the weight of its fruit and had to be relieved of some of the crop. A calamondin and Surinam cherries ("I took a little historical license," conceded Goetz) and bananas flank four raised beds of herbs that can grow here, except in the fierce humidity and heat of summer. Edible nasturtiums add color; allspice adds fragrance; and pineapple plants are part of the garden.

The Garden of the Senses, which Goetz says any household that cooled off on its front porch would have appreciated. Pentas, which will bring an added sensory experience of butterflies, weren't part of the cottage's era as a home. The heirloom roses that bloom there could have conceivably been imported, however. Frangipani is another fragrance bearer planted there.

The Palm Collector's Garden. A Victorian fascination in the age of wanderlust, palm collector gardens are still a hobby today in subtropical Naples. In fact, they're seen much more now than they were when Palm Cottage was a winter home to Pulitzer Prize winner

and legislator Henry Watterson.

"People used to travel and bring home seeds and grow these. It's also a perfect way to show examples of the palms that do grow here," said Goetz. Visitors will see some local favorites and novelties — the Old Man Palm, for example, with a trunk hoary with beardlike fur, a muted Silver Saw Palmetto and the blue-hued Bismarkia Palm.

The Water Garden, holding water lilies and other water plants, which seems to be less a historical than to add topographical charm. Near it, a family of herons rise in permanent flight, a local gift of William Turner sculpture.

The garden also has a palm-thatch chickee, representative of the area's Native American heritage. O.B. Osceola, of the Seminole Osceola people, built it to Native American standards in less than a week. "They're watertight. You stand under there on a hot day and it's 10 degrees cooler," said Wingard, who makes believers of skeptics by walking them in to sample the climate. There's one final addition the society says will be popular with everyone. For the first time since it was opened, thanks to a refiguring of what was a garage outside the house, Palm Cottage will now have visitors' restrooms.

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